

## 5 The virus of 'blame'

### How television news transposed Islamophobia onto COVID-19 pandemic in India

*Arif Hussain Nadaf*

#### Introduction

From the 1918 Spanish flu to the 2009 H1N1 influenza, pandemics have aggravated preexisting prejudices toward communities while amplifying hate and discrimination. In the existing literature, there is ample evidence of embedded bias and ethical crisis in Indian journalism while portraying Muslim minorities around national controversies (Rajagopal, 2001; Manchanda, 2002). This chapter examines the case of a religious event organized by the Muslim organization, Tablighi Jamaat in Delhi, India, during the onset of the pandemic in March 2020. The gathering of followers from different countries inevitably led to the COVID-19 infections among the attendees. The spread of infections drew widespread public criticism of the event and prompted a huge government response targeting the organization and its members. The criticism subsequently transcended into perpetual Islamophobic discourse with Muslims being blatantly blamed as the reason for the growing coronavirus in the country. The hateful rhetoric against Muslims, aggravated in the wake of growing criticism of the Muslim organization and the right-wing political actors, cultivated the opportunity to communalize the situation and promote Islamophobia. The liberal usage of provocative terms in the news like "corona bomb", "betrayal", "Corona Jihad", "super-spreader Maulana" and "Corona terrorism" exposed the embedded bias toward Muslims in the Indian mainstream news media. The chapter reflects on the journalistic bias that not only vilified the organization for congregating at the Delhi event but further polarized the situation by casting the Muslims as the "other". This chapter situates television news coverage of the Tablighi Jamaat controversy within the recurrent issue of sociopolitical discrimination against Muslim minorities in India. The news narratives on the controversy besides reflecting explicit demonization of the Tablighi members paved the way for understanding the perilous phenomenon of Islamophobia which continues to be a constant feature of the Indian sociopolitical context.

#### The congregation and controversy

Between 11–13 March 2020, an Islamic organization, Tablighi Jamaat, held its annual meeting (*Aalmi Mashwara*) at the Nizamuddin Markaz headquarters